

ED 337 770

CS 212 933

AUTHOR Eanet, Marilyn G.
TITLE Expanding Literacy by the Use of Imaginative Literature in the Teacher Education Classroom.
PUB DATE Dec 90
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Reading Forum (11th, Sarasota, FL, December 12-15, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; *Literature Appreciation; *Preservice Teacher Education; Reading Material Selection; *Student Attitudes; Supplementary Reading Materials; Undergraduate Students

ABSTRACT

A teacher educator wanted to help teacher education students examine and get beyond the years of modeling and conditioning in the less productive aspects of traditional teaching practice. Based on her personal experiences with literature, and convinced of the power of imaginative literature to be a positive influence in teacher education, she selected several readings to use with an elementary reading methods course and with a secondary methods course that combined content reading with an introduction to basic teaching skills. Students were asked to read the selections and write personal responses in their journals. Quotations from students' journals indicated that reading imaginative literature stimulated reflection about teaching and learning. Students reflected on their past experiences in school and how they might behave in their own classrooms in the future. Short anonymous reactions to the extra readings, written by students at the end of the term, were unanimously positive. Integrating imaginative literature about school, teaching, and learning allows teacher educators to demonstrate the value of literature, encourages students to pursue the reading of literature as a relevant and enjoyable activity, and places imaginative literature as an integral part of the learning experience of future teachers. (RS)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED337770

EXPANDING LITERACY BY THE USE OF IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE
IN THE TEACHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM

by

Marilyn G. Eanet, Ph.D.

Rhode Island College

Providence, Rhode Island

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marilyn Eanet

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) "

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy

CS 212 933

EXPANDING LITERACY BY THE USE OF IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE
IN THE TEACHER EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Long ago when I was just learning to read, and the world was (as usual) tottering on the brink of war, I discovered that if I wanted to look for the truth of what was happening around me ... the place to look for that truth was in story. Facts simply told me what things were. Story told me what they were about, and sometimes even what they meant. It never occurred to me then, when I was little, that story is more appropriate for children than adults. It is still, for me, the vehicle of truth. (L'Engle, 1991, p. 324)

Let me tell you a story.

INITIATING EVENT AND RESPONSE

About a year and a half ago, I participated in a faculty seminar about the current knowledge base in teacher education. Our group was charged with revising a program, and we were excited about making meaningful changes in our own classrooms. In the process, I read a paper by Maxine Greene in which she referred to the power that imaginative literature has to "render events in such a manner as to prompt the questions generating the formation of a knowledge base." (Greene, 1989, p. 146)

Awkward as I found that statement, it also intrigued me. Our group had been talking about some crucial issues in teacher education; and among those issues, I was especially concerned with the problem of helping teacher education students examine and get beyond the years of modeling, indeed, conditioning, in the less productive aspects of traditional practice. We wanted to develop new teachers who are reflective practitioners; I wondered if we were being blind to a very powerful aspect of human culture that could be a part of this developmental process -- imaginative literature? Questions came flooding into my mind. Are there works of literature that would naturally complement the teacher education curriculum? Are there short stories, novels, poems that students would find engaging, enlightening, perplexing, that would introduce new perspectives -- as teachers-to-be think about classrooms, students, and teaching? I could think of a few works of literature that might serve in this way, and I suspected that there were more.

Shortly after this experience, I serendipitously stumbled upon to a description of Robert Cole's book The Call of Stories (1989) in a book catalog. Reading this delightful and inspiring volume, I found confirmation. Indeed, Dr. Cole had already done what I was considering; that is, he had taught courses using literature in a number of the professional schools at Harvard including the Graduate School of Education. The book he wrote grew out of conversations with students about literature; and it

documents, beyond doubt, the power of literature in the intellectual and ethical development of students. He talks about "...the wonderful mimetic power a novel or a story can have -- its capacity to work its way into one's thinking life, yes, but also one's reveries or idle thoughts, even one's mood and dreams." (p. 204) He shares his belief, and that of his mentor William Carlos Williams, that stories have the power to take readers beyond what is known only by the intellect and thus to actually influence behavior toward others.

Based on Cole's writing and my personal experiences with literature, I was convinced of the power of imaginative literature to be a positive influence in teacher education. Stories resonate more deeply than much of the material we typically use with our students; stories speak not only to the thinking function but also to the emotional and intuitive functions of the individual. Thus it is possible that stories have the potential to influence behavior in a way that material which is only directed toward the rational and logical functions does not. Don't we all remember images from our reading of literature that stay with us and remind us of that which is meaningful? As one of Cole's students expressed it: "...he [the protagonist] might even make a difference in my life, because he's part of what it is that's in my head that remembers and decides and is loyal to this and doesn't like something else. He is part of my mind's life." (Cole, 1989, p. 129)

To examine the value of stories from a different perspective, research about teaching which is cognitively-based suggests that experienced teachers have better developed conceptual systems about classrooms and learning. Shavelson suggests that three types of schemata characterize teacher thinking: scripts, scenes, and propositional structures. Propositional structures are the representations of factual knowledge about classrooms and students. A script is a knowledge structure about familiar, everyday experiences in which the relationships are temporal. Scenes represent knowledge of people and objects in classrooms -- spatial relationships. (Borko & Shavelson, 1990) While propositional structures are by nature expository, both scripts and scenes are more characteristic of the narrative -- the story. I would never suggest that either imaginative literature or "teacher stories" replace actual classroom experience in developing scripts and scenes, but I would suggest that such literature might have a contribution to make in their development.

Addition support for the use of stories may be inferred from the work of theorists and researchers who advocate the use of narrative in human sciences research. In Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, Jerome Bruner writes:

There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of

ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought. (1986, p.11)

The two modes he identifies are the logico-scientific or paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode. Other theorists go so far as to suggest that the narrative mode might actually be the most appropriate mode for the investigation of human behavior (Polkinghorne, 1988).

ATTEMPTS AND OUTCOMES

The decision to explore the use of stories in my teacher education classes raised a whole new set of questions: What stories? Used in what way? How do I find time? How do I evaluate their effect? After a flurry of searching-- asking colleagues for ideas, visiting libraries and bookstores, and reading stories and novels ranging from Chekhov and Dickens to Judy Bloom, I selected several readings to use with two of my undergraduate teacher education classes; one was an elementary reading methods course, and the second, a secondary methods course that combines content reading with an introduction to basic teaching skills. While my original intention was to use only fiction, I choose to include one nonfiction "teacher story" in each class. Students were asked to read the selections and write personal responses in their journals. Their instructions

were simply to write about what they thought and/or how they felt about reading. I chose not to use these literary selections for the purpose of demonstrating reading strategies; I did not provide any special prereading preparation except for providing a brief context for the excerpts from larger works. Postreading discussion was equally nondirected--merely an opportunity for students to share their reactions voluntarily. I wanted to feel confident that student responses were "pure" in the sense of not influenced by my interpretation of the selections or by my desire for them to view the reading experience in any particular way. To evaluate the experience, I analyzed their written responses. The major question that I was seeking to explore was whether or not the reading appeared to stimulate reflection about teaching and learning. I was also interested in learning if students would enjoy the readings and even find them useful to their thinking about teaching. Let me share some of my students' responses.

Elementary Reading Methods Class

The literature that the students in the elementary reading methods class read included Chapters 2 and 3 from To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960). The following entries are a sample of the responses:

In the opening paragraph, Scout describes how she longed to join the other kids in school and spent hours watching them in the school yard. By the end of her first

day, she had been reprimanded unnecessarily and whipped in front of the whole school: if that doesn't kill a child's natural curiosity and enthusiasm for school, nothing will. My own children also went off to school eager and excited to learn, and I see it waning in my second grader already. Some things haven't changed, but they need to. This passage reminded me of the need for teachers to be in tune with their students.

...I thought to myself, am I going to be that strict when I am a brand new teacher? Also, if I teach in another state, will I be picked on because I don't know the 'ropes' of the school? It came across that Miss Caroline was trying too hard to prove herself as a teacher.

Scout is an atypical student because she is an early reader and quite precocious. This presented some problems for her since her teacher, the stereotypical new, young teacher, has no idea how to deal with Scout's individuality and ability. Communication is a problem in this classroom since the culture of the community is alien to the teacher. Students and teacher struggle to understand one another with limited success. This account provides a good example of what it can mean for both students and teacher to be thrust into a situation where much is demanded of them on both the

personal and academic levels.

I thought a little about the teacher and her experience as a "new" teacher and the frightening experience it probably was for her and will be for me someday. Somehow I was more moved by the dilemma that Scout faced as a first grader who could read and write and was being discouraged from doing so until taught "correctly" by her teacher. May I never do to any child what this teacher did to Scout. About the only thing positive that I could see that came out of this situation for Scout was that her teacher forced her to think about how she had learned to read. She was fortunate to have come from an environment rich in literacy which fostered her desire to read.

While students made literal connections between the chapters read and the content of our study of emergent literacy, they also showed evidence of thinking about larger issues.

This class also read a poem that had been published in The Reading Teacher; "When I read a good book" by Jennifer Rose, a fifth grader.

What a great poem! This child has a true understanding about reading for meaning. She expressed how I feel about reading. ... it is refreshing to know that there are kids who still enjoy a good book. Jennifer Rose described a good

book perfectly. One does not read a good book passively, but rather becomes a part of it.

When I first read the poem, I did not think that a fifth grader wrote it. To be quite honest, I am really surprised that a fifth grader could feel all of these emotions and make the associations that she did. I admire Jennifer for her determination and her teacher for providing that opportunity for her to write and express herself so confidently.

I am inspired by this little girl's perspective on reading. I have never been a lover of reading, but I am learning to be. I have also discovered that as a teacher, you are an important guide to your students, but you should try very hard not to put limitations on what children can do. You can be surprised by what children can do if you give them a little freedom to use their imaginations.

Secondary Methods Class

The students in the secondary education class begin their reading with two chapters from Up the Down StairCase (Kaufman, 1964) I was needlessly concerned that they would find the material dated.

After reading the excerpt from Up the Down Staircase,

I couldn't decide whether I am cut out to be a teacher or not. It seemed such a chore to reach the students. This quote hit home though: 'I saw how barren were the years they brought me; I saw how desperately they need me'. Are teachers supposed to be miracle workers? Teachers are responsible for more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic; they must make learning fun, reform structure, deal with family problems, drugs, unsatisfactory tests, just to name a few. Although this work was written some years ago, a lot of it is still true; things may be even more complex today.... As a teacher, where does one go with a group of students like this? It's so overwhelming. So much must be changed with so few resources and time running out. I'm not even a teacher and I feel the pressure already. But at least I'm not going into the profession blind.

I was interested in discerning the traits that the students used to describe good and bad teachers. Many of the students liked teachers who they believed liked them back. The 'bad' teachers seemed ignorantly strict, inconsiderate, incommunicative, prejudiced, passive, and boring. The students' comments were often humorous while being touching at the same time. It was very disheartening to read that 'teachers try to make us feel lower than themselves.' This jolted my view of teachers....

...I keep thinking of one thing that Syl (the teacher) and the students have in common -- FEAR. They are both fearful of what lies ahead -- of the unknown. Syl is afraid she won't be able to 'reach' her students. She is afraid that all her college education may not have prepared her for what she is about to embark upon. She wants to do a wonderful job. She is eager and full of enthusiasm. She specifically mentions several things that she wasn't prepared for that interfere with her teaching such as the paperwork and some of her colleagues' indifference toward their school and job.

The students, too, are full of fear... The letters that they wrote regarding English have fear and hope woven between the lines. They want to learn but are afraid to tell anyone. They want someone to trust. Their backgrounds seem so diverse. I think Syl is wise to try to learn a little about their homes; it will help her understand them.

Over all, I felt that the chapters were very real as far as how teachers and students have the same basic feelings.... If Syl can reach some of them and keep her enthusiasm, she'll be great.

I love Kaufman's humor; it serves to smooth over some of the underlying tension of her position as the new teacher. Sylvia's fears are my fears, such as the kids' apathy and their 'unquestioning acceptance of whatever

is taught to them by anyone in front of the room.'

The administration, too, foils attempts at learning by forbidding students on school premises at unauthorized times: it seems education has its own strict and enforced time table. Signs should be posted on classroom doors: 'No Learning After Hours.' The school's administration frightens me more than the staring, bland, apathetic 'field of faces' behind desks. At least the kids are somewhat malleable; the administration, however, must maintain a cemented mindset in an attempt to preserve order (based on anachronistic tradition). Like Sylvia, I too am afraid that the institution I end up in will not be conducive to teaching or learning.

Not only did these students find Up the Down Staircase contemporary, but, to my amazement, many of them even felt uncomfortably at home in the first chapters of Dickens' Hard Times: "This reminds me of my school days -- seemed I spent most of my time learning facts for tests I would forget as soon as the test was over."

Hard Times brought out feelings in me that made me remember my days in grammar and middle schools. I had a teacher who made my class in 7th grade feel the same way. He was a math teacher who did the same things as

Mr. Thomas Gradgrind. He was a relentless teacher who would come at you from all different angles. It was a very bad class for us, and we still talk about it today when we get together.

I LOVE DICKENS! I know it is sad that I love such depressing stuff, but most time I feel good after his work - maybe because I am relieved with my own life! This selection is relevant to our discussion about questioning and what students should learn from a text or presentation. I know my fault lies in not putting enough emphasis on facts. I focus an awful lot on ideas and big stuff!! I need to be reminded that knowing facts can lead to great ideas.

Another selection that the secondary students read was a section from Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary (1989). In these passages Rose writes about some of his experiences in elementary and secondary school. Students found this account a source of surprises. As one said, "I guess somewhere in my mind, I thought that students in lower-level classes just belonged there. Well, I've realized, after reading Lives on the Boundary. that all students are capable and they all deserve the best possible learning experience." Other students had similar insights:

It hadn't yet crossed my mind that I will or at least I could be teaching to students at the remedial level. Having always been in honor classes myself, my idea of whom I will be teaching many be somewhat unrealistic. Mike Rose started me thinking of the problems and other important issues schools face from having to provide for children at different levels. I hope I turn out to be one teacher who doesn't give up on those kids and manages to show them respect and that their capabilities could extend beyond what the system may decide is their level.

Mr. Rose wrote about his experience in a parochial school. I was amazed at how he felt being in the low track and then placed where he 'should be', in the college prep track.

He was troubled in his classes. I was always in the high track and felt troubled, too. Being the 'elite' meant that you could not fail. I felt a failure if I didn't understand and had to ask a question.

The school system's practice of tracking influenced the kids' opinions of themselves. Ken Harvey adapted the 'average' opinion of himself. I wonder what would have happened if a 'mistake' had been made with him and he had been placed in college prep courses. Would he have succeeded? How different his life might have been.

The teachers weren't any help either. They

couldn't handle their classrooms or handled them badly. Corporal punishment and ridicule are not ways to handle teenagers.

RESOLUTION AND REACTION

What have I learned? My major question was whether or not reading imaginative literature would stimulate reflection about teaching and learning. The quotations from students' journals that I have shared with you are but a sampling of the evidence I have to verify that this indeed happens. There are two especially interesting categories of responses in the data base. The first category contains examples of reflection of past experience in school, both negative and positive. The second category contains examples of students' reflections about how they do, or do not, want to behave in their own classrooms in the future. Both categories seem to me to be a valuable part of the reflection and introspection needed in the process of learning to be an effective teacher.

I had also wondered about whether or not my students would be receptive to these selections and to the additional time and effort that reading them added to their classwork. While the journal entries seemed to reflect a positive response, I also asked each class to write a short anonymous reaction to the extra readings at the end of the term. To my amazement, all the responses were positive. One student said, "I am not a big

literature buff, but I must say that the use of literature in this class was a good tool." Another suggested that not only were the selections interesting, but that there should have been more of them. Another student was more descriptive:

I thought the supplementary readings helped to increase interest in the class and in education in general. Each piece provided a different view of the learning experience. Together, they served to create a representation of the difficulties and benefits of teaching, as well as presenting some of the problems with the current system. These excerpts offered a variation from the textbook. Reading them was very enjoyable and may also have promoted stimulation for further reading.

What more could a teacher educator want? I will continue to integrate imaginative literature about school, teaching and learning into my teacher education classes. As student responses have indicated, it promotes reflection about teaching and learning; it provides students with an opportunity to reexamine their educational pasts and speculate about their professional futures. The selections can be used to model lesson formats and teaching strategies and to extend student schemata about reading and literature. Perhaps most importantly, the practice allows me to demonstrate the value of literature and my own love of the story; it encourages students to pursue the reading of literature as a relevant and enjoyable activity; and it places imaginative

literature where I think it belongs -- not just as something we talk about teaching children to read, but as an integral part of the learning experience of future teachers.

REFERENCES

- Borko, H. , & Shavelson, R. J. (1990). Teacher decision making. In B. F. Jones & L. Idol (Eds.), Dimensions of thinking and cognitive instuction (pp. 311-346). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bruner, J. (1986). Actual minds, possible worlds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coles, R. (1989). The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination. Boston, Ma: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Dickens, C. (1854). Hard times. New York: Bantam Books.
- Kaufman, B. (1964). Up the down staircase. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- Greene, M. (1989). Social and political contexts. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed), Knowledge base for the beginning teacher. (pp.143-154). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Lee, H. (1960). To kill a mockingbird. New York: Harper Books.
- L'Engle, M. (1991). Through the eyes of an author: the search for truth. In D. E. Norton, Through the eyes of a child. New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, p. 324.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). Narrative knowing and the human sciences. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Rose, J. (1989). When I read a good book. The Reading Teacher,
43, 88.

Rose, M. (1989). Lives on the Boundary. New York: Penguin
Books USA.